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SC pulls up U'khand govt over forest land grab

A vacation bench initiated a suo motu case on Monday observing that the state remained a mute spectator while forest land was being grabbed. The case concerns 2,866 acres of forest land, a part of which was leased to Pashu Lok Seva Samiti. The society subsequently allotted land parcels to its members. A dispute later arose, and it went into liquidation in 1984, surrendering 594 acres to government. But, some individuals claimed to have taken possession of the land in 2001 | P10

US expands online review of H-1B, H4 applicants

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ New Delhi

THE United States has extended online presence reviews to all H-1B and H-4 visa applicants worldwide, a move aimed at curbing work visa programme abuse but causing disruptions.

"Beginning December 15, the Department of State expanded online presence reviews to ALL H-1B and H-4 applicants as part of standard visa screening," the US Embassy in New Delhi said Monday.

"This vetting is being conducted globally for ALL applicants of ALL nationalities... while still permitting companies to hire the best of the best temporary foreign workers."

H-4 visas cover spouses and unmarried children under 21 of H-1B holders. The State Department warned of delays, encouraging applicants to "apply as early as they can".

The expanded vetting has already disrupted travel plans for Indian H-1B holders who returned home to renew visas. Dozens of visa interviews scheduled between December 15-26 were abruptly cancelled or postponed, with many rescheduled for as late as March, *The Washington Post* reported. The State Department said delays followed expanded social media screening "to ensure that no applicants... pose a threat to U.S. national security or public safety."

Immigration lawyers described the impact as severe. "This is the biggest mess we have seen. I'm not sure there is a plan," Indian immigration lawyer Veena Vijay Ananth told *The Washington Post*.

B'desh halts visa to Indians

National Citizen Party leader Motaleb Sikdar shot at, further stoking pre-poll tension

JAYANTH JACOB @ New Delhi

THE Bangladesh High Commission in Delhi on Monday suspended all visa and consular services for Indians, as political violence and protests continued to roil the country less than two months ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for February 12.

Its Assistant High Commission in Agartala had suspended visa services on Sunday after protests by the Tipra Motha Party and others outside the mission. Visa services run by a private operator on Bangladesh's behalf in Siliguri, West Bengal, were also halted following protests. No timeline was given for the resumption of services, amid heightened diplomatic and security sensitivities.

The suspension comes two days after a group of around 20-25 protesters demonstrated outside the Bangladesh mission in Delhi, condemning the killing of Dipu Chandra Das, a garment worker in Mymensingh, and demanding protection for minorities in Bangladesh.

Motaleb Sikdar

Bangladesh's Editors' Council protests the mob attack on *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star* in Dhaka, on Monday | AFP

External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal had on Sunday said "there was no attempt to breach the fence or create a security situation at any time," adding the police dispersed the group within minutes. Days after the killing of prominent youth leader Sharif Osman Bin Hadi, another political activist was attacked on Monday. Motaleb Sikdar, Khulna divisional chief of the National Citizen Party (NCP), was shot in the head in Khulna and is undergoing treatment. The attack has intensified fears of targeted violence and political unrest.

Hadi, 32, was the founder of Inqilab Moncho, a platform that emerged from last year's mass protests against then PM Sheikh Hasina, which culminated in her ouster. He had announced plans to contest the February 12 elections and was campaigning in Dhaka when he was shot earlier this month.

His death triggered widespread protests, with supporters alleging that the assailants fled to India and demanding their arrest. Police, however, said there is no clarity on the suspects' whereabouts. Inqilab Moncho issued an ultimatum, threatening to launch a movement to oust the interim administration if justice is not delivered in Hadi's murder. "The deadline has passed without any visible steps from the authorities," said Abdullah Al Jaber, a leader of the platform.

Bangladesh's interim leadership convened a high-level meeting to review law and order. Meanwhile, Indian student bodies urged Delhi to ensure the safety of Indian nationals.

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New Zealand joins FTA list, fastest deal so far

DIPAK MONDAL @ New Delhi

IN one of the fastest trade negotiations in recent times, India New Zealand on Monday concluded a free trade agreement (FTA) in just nine months, offering duty-free access for Indian goods to the island nation's markets. India has sealed seven free trade pacts since 2014. The FTA with New Zealand is the third in the year so far. India has been looking to explore new markets ever since US President Trump imposed 50% tariff on goods.

On Monday, PM Narendra Modi held a phone conversation with New Zealand PM Christopher Luxon after which they announced the conclusion of what they described as the "historic, ambitious and mutually beneficial" pact.

Earlier, New Zealand imposed peak tariffs of up to 10% on key Indian exports. Now, 100% of India's current exports will get tariff-free access to the New Zealand market. P13

In a Kerala shrine rests relic of real-life 'Santa'

RENJITH LEEN @ Kochi

AS the Yuletide spirit fills the air, posters, cutouts, and dolls of Santa Claus appear everywhere, heralding the season of love and sharing.

However, not many may know that Santa, the most popular symbol of Christmas, is inspired from and modelled after St Nicholas, a fourth-century bishop from Myra in ancient Turkey, who was known for his generosity and secret gift-giving. Some may even find it hard to believe that the real-life Santa has a Kerala connection.

For more than a century, Pampakuda, a sleepy village located 35 km away from Ernakulam, has been home to a relic of St Nicholas. Barring residents, not many are aware that the modest wayside shrine at Pampakuda in front of St John's Ephesus Orthodox Church is home to six priceless relics, one of which is a fragment of the remains of St Nicholas.

The reliquary containing the relic

"St Geevarghese Mar Gregorios, aka Parumala Thirumeni, brought the relics to Pampakuda after visiting the Holy Land in 1895. He wished to gift them to his tutor, Konat Geevarghese Malpan. Upon learning that his beloved guru had passed away while he was overseas, St Gregorios gifted the relics to Fr. Konat Mathen, who was the Malpan (teacher) at the time. My grandfather, Konat Mathen Malpan, was instrumental in enshrining the relics near the wayside cross. Later, a proper shrine was built, and the reliquaries were enshrined there," said the priest whose family had several illustrious Syriac scholars.

Fr Konat explained that the relics were gifted to St Gregorios by the Metropolitan of Jerusalem.

Man murders pregnant daughter for marrying a Dalit in Hubballi

Manya & Vivekananda

AMIT S UPADHYE @ Hubballi

IN a case of honour killing, a man, along with his two brothers, murdered his pregnant daughter at Inam Virapur village in Hubballi taluk on Sunday night. Both the girl, Manya, 20, and her baby died in the attack. Her husband Vivekananda was away from home during the attack. His parents, who were at home, suffered injuries. The Hubballi Rural police arrested the girl's father, Prakash Gouda, and his brothers Iranna and Arun, who are Lingayats. Vivekananda's parents said Prakash with two others barged into the house and started attacking them with iron rods and weapons. P7

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